

# The Lord Over History Enters Into It

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>1</sup> In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup> And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:1–7).

### Christmas in February?

- A. Allow me to ask the question perhaps some of you were asking yourselves even as we read this: What are we doing studying a Christmas text in February?
  - 1. Does this feel a little awkward to you? We’re supposed to read this on Christmas Eve or something, with Advent candles lit and a nativity set up...but we’re in February now. It feels out of place, like we’re behind the times.
- B. We were over at our friends’ house and I noticed a verse from this narrative in Luke was painted permanently in beautiful calligraphy on the wall: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:11).
  - 1. But my first instinct was: that’s nice for Christmas, but all year long, on your wall?
    - a. I immediately had to repent. I daresay this family understands something I’m prone to forget: namely, the incarnation is essential to the whole system of redemption, which makes it profoundly relevant to every day of my life.
- C. Responding to all the controversies regarding the nature of Christ in the early centuries of the church, Gregory of Nazianzus argued famously: “What has not been assumed has not been healed.”
  - 1. In other words: If God did not take on humanity in full, then He could not redeem humanity in full either. A man had to fulfill man’s side of the covenant—suffering the curses and securing the blessings as our Substitute. If Christ, who is fully God, was not also fully man, then man is still dead in His sins.
- D. Therefore, again, the incarnation of Jesus Christ—God becoming man—is profoundly relevant to every day of my life.

1. Setting apart a season or day to reflect upon a certain aspect of Christ's redemptive accomplishment is helpful so long as we don't think we move on from these topics the rest of the year. The opposite dynamic is actually the goal. For these seasons are meant to help us refocus on what we should be focusing on the whole year through.
  - a. So this isn't just a Christmas text. It's an every-day-of-my-life text! We must not let the Christmas season monopolize texts and truths we need all year long!

## The Outline

- A. Now, I'm going to apportion my thoughts under 2 headings here: (1) The Lord over History (vv. 1-5); and (2) The Lord in History (vv. 6-7).

## (1) The Lord over History (vv. 1-5)

### Getting the Son of David into the City of David

- A. In our text, Bethlehem is called "the city of David" (v. 4) because it was the city in which King David of old was born (1 Sam 17:12a).
- B. Bethlehem is also a place of prophetic expectation. It seems there was a consensus among the Jews in Jesus' day that the Messiah, the promised King coming in the line of David, would also be born in the city of David.
- C. The consensus was largely due to one text found in Mic 5.
  1. Micah was an OT prophet called to minister to Israel at a time when their sins had all but tipped them over the cliff onto the rocks of God's judgment. The Assyrian siege of Jerusalem seems to be the immediate context (4:11; 5:5), but even the threat of the Babylonian exile had already been prophetically cast over them like a deathly shadow (4:10).
  2. But into the gloom of this context the Lord prophecies through Micah: " <sup>1</sup>Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. <sup>2</sup> But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. <sup>3</sup> Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel" (Mic 5:1-3).
    - a. Israel, you will be given up to war, exile, discouragement, "until the time when she who is in labor has given birth." This child will rise up as "ruler in Israel", He will gather the faithful remnant of Israel, and He will be born in insignificant little "Bethlehem"!

- D. Now we know Jesus is to be this child but there's one glaring historical dilemma. Joseph and Mary are living in Nazareth of Galilee, a town 90 miles north of Bethlehem. So what's God going to do?

## Natural Means to Supernatural Ends

- A. What amazed me as I came to our text in Luke isn't the fact that such a prophecy ends up being fulfilled. We know to be true of Him what is recorded in Josh: "Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass" (21:45).
- B. What amazed me, rather, was the sheer earthiness of it all, the seemingly natural means God uses to accomplish such supernatural ends.
1. A census, most likely for the purpose of taxation. An Emperor's greed. "Go and register at the place of your ancestral family so that I can make sure I'm taxing you properly." So Joseph, "because he was of the house and lineage of David" went up with Mary to the city of David (v. 4), where Jesus would be born in fulfillment of Mic 5:2.
    - a. As one commentator observes: "The accidental events of history have become acts of destiny" (Bock, p. 203). What seems ordinary, happenstance, accidental, had behind and beneath it the very hand of God!
- C. We are given this window into the way God fulfills His word, and we would be smart to linger here. Consider the events from the perspective of Joseph and Mary. Certainly such a thing would seem like an interference, an almost mean-spirited disruption of their lives.
1. I'm not sure how long such a journey would have taken them, with an animal or on foot, (5 days for a healthy male), but I do know that being almost 9 months pregnant, it would have felt like an eternity. I imagine there was much temptation towards grumbling and discontentment. "What's the deal with this emperor, why now, God why can't I just be home in my bed?"
    - a. And yet, behind and beneath all this seemingly natural stuff was the hand of God. They might have been disoriented and distressed but God knew right where they were, and He knew right where He was taking them.

## Drawing Lines Into the Details

- A. What right do we have to draw lines from this into the details of our own lives? I mean this stuff is happening for Jesus, the Son of God. Surely events are ordered to suit God's plan for Him. But would it not be terribly presumptuous to assume the same for my life?
1. "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Pro 16:33).
  2. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matt 10:29).

3. “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).
  4. “<sup>11</sup>In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,<sup>12</sup> so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:11–12).
- B. So, far from being presumptuous, drawing the lines from this narrative in Luke into the details of our own lives is paramount to the walk of faith.
1. It is mysterious how Divine sovereignty works alongside the will of man. But we must not forego one for the other. One of the chief secrets of the Christian life, it seems to me, is learning to see His hand behind and beneath everything that comes at us.
    - a. The moment we think that things come at us randomly and without purpose, we lose the very essence of faith. But when we believe that everything comes to us from God with good purpose, we are ready to respond with hope and love. We are ready to look for His hand, His fingerprints on everything.
      - i. We approach an upturned toilet seat, a traffic jam, a job demotion, a stubbed toe, an Emperor’s decree, every twist and turn of life (whether small or great) with unswerving faith.
- C. Do not despise the way God might choose to rearrange your life, disorder it, it is actually the way He fulfills His plan and promise for us. He is always moving forward with His plan, even when, especially when, it unravels our own.

## (2) The Lord In History (vv. 6-7)

### Getting the Story Straight

- A. In vv. 6-7 we see that this Lord over history is now entering into it! “<sup>6</sup>And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.<sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn”
- B. The details of the Christmas story have been crystallized for us in tradition beyond what we actually have in the text.
1. There’s no indication of Joseph and Mary knocking on every door in the town, we only know that “there was no place for them in the inn.”
  2. Nor are we certain what precisely this “inn” referred to: an inn, a public shelter, a guest-house? The Gk. word chosen is unclear.
  3. Nor are we certain whether Jesus was therefore born in a stable, a cave, or under the open sky.

- C. We do know that the Son of God, the King of glory, the Alpha and the Omega, the One through whom all things have been made, the One by whom all things are upheld, the Lord over history, when He finally enters into it, He is a baby “wrapped...in swaddling cloths and laid...in a manger (a feeding trough for animals), because there was no place for them in the inn” (v. 7).
  - 1. One commentator, after noting all that we don’t know for sure about His birth, puts it this way: “We know only that everything points to poverty, obscurity and even rejection” (Tyndale).

## The Burning Question

- A. And the burning question that emerges at this point is: If God could so order history to put Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ birth, why in the world would He then order the rest of it in this way? Why would He bring such a magnificent king (prophesied from of old) into the world in such a humble, unbecoming way (in a manger, in a stable)? What is the Lord of heaven and earth, doing sleeping with the animals?!
  - 1. Why not open up a room for Him? Why not announce it to the kings of the world? Why poverty, obscurity, rejection? What is God communicating to us here?
- B. Think about this! How are great people typically introduced?
  - 1. Basketball players get the flashing lights and the loud music; movie stars get the red carpet; Even the Pope gets to come out in the pope-mobile; when Princess Kate had her first child (Prince George), news reporters were actually in downtown Philly interviewing people to get their responses.
    - a. Great people get great introductions. The greater the person, the greater the esteem and fanfare.
- C. So we must be struck, no matter how many times we’ve heard this story, by the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, is born and nobody cares. There’s not even a place for Him. Heaven is leaning in and can barely contain itself, but men would’ve hardly noticed otherwise.

## The End from the Beginning

- A. So why? If He could enter in any way, why this way?
  - 1. He didn’t come for the glamour. Satan offers Him the kingdoms of this world and He says in essence: “Get behind me...I haven’t come to set my throne here (yet)...I’ve come to die.”
- B. In vv. 6-7 we have the gospel in miniature, in capsule form. The end of His life is here foreshadowed at the beginning.

1. The hard fact of the matter is that this is actually as good as it will get for Him. For His poverty, obscurity, and rejection would only grow more pointed as His life goes on.
  - a. His nights in a manger with the animals were probably the best night's sleep He ever got: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luk 9:58).
- C. Phil 2 gives us the descending staircase that would characterize the rest of His days: " <sup>6</sup> though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (vv. 6–8).
  1. Jesus would step down from the manger to the cross—where the heavenly king is made utterly impoverished; where the name above all names is trampled into obscurity; where the Jews, the Gentiles, the entire human race, and even His own Father would acid rain on Him with their rejection.
    - a. Because of my sin. That's my poverty, obscurity, rejection, but He took it for me!
- D. "What has not been assumed has not been healed." But Christ has assumed humanity, "being born in the likeness of men." And He has brought healing to our race fallen in Adam. Because He suffered under the wrath of God in my place. And He rose victorious over Satan, sin, and death, offering eternal life freely to all who would repent and believe.

## Conclusion

- A. The way the sovereign Lord over history chooses to enter into it explodes with implications. I'll give two here as we close.

### (1) The Incarnation Implies that God Is Not Interested in the Show

- A. "The most humble birth for the most exalted figure ever born shows that the key values of life are found in the life itself, not in the accoutrements that come with [it]. The note of humility surrounding this birth of Jesus issues a major challenge to our culture, where [boastful] and self-promoting public relations are often a way of life...The birth of Jesus...shows that greatness is not a function of the size of one's bank account or one's social resume. Status does not make the person, for God recognizes the quality of the inner person" (Block, NIVAC).
- B. The incarnation is an affront on the world's value system.
  1. And we must ask, have we been so reorganized by the Spirit that we now see Christ as the wisdom and power of God, or do still live as if such things are foolishness and weakness? Have we learned to value what God values, or are we still in the show?

- a. Get the right car, know the right person, live in the right neighborhood, wear the right size, etc.
- C. The incarnation gets in the face of the flesh and says: “Stop parading! God doesn’t care about all the accoutrements, He cares about the heart of faith and love.” Getting low, humble, broken might look foolish to the world but it is the sweetest aroma to God.

## (2) The Incarnation Implies that God Is the Only True Christian

- A. Some of us are still trying too hard to be Christians. We’re still scrubbing with soap—our language, our behavior, our thoughts. We’re trying to live this thing.
  - 1. And that in many ways is something admirable. But we must stop and ask whether what Paul said of the Jews is true of us: “<sup>2</sup>I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.<sup>3</sup> For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.<sup>4</sup> For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom 10:2–4).
- B. What the incarnation says before it says anything else is that I can’t be a Christian. If I could do this thing, God wouldn’t have had to come in the first place. The incarnation is God rolling up His sleeves, coming down into humanity and doing it for us.
- C. It’s amazing. God is always able to hold two seemingly opposite truths in tension.
  - 1. On the one hand, the incarnation communicates that I am condemned. I am a sinner and there really is no hope for me becoming any better in myself. The incarnation is reproach in the same sense that a boss whose employee continues to screw up the tasks given to him has to come in and do it himself. It is humbling to the bones.
  - 2. But He strikes the ego to heal the heart. For, on the other hand, the incarnation communicates that I am loved beyond my wildest dreams. This Boss is not grumbling and bitter at me, ready to fire me.
    - a. He’s come to do my work, yes, but He’s come to do it in such a way that a new partnership could be forged.
    - b. He comes not to judge me but to save me.
    - c. He comes not lord it over me but to live the Christian life for me.
    - d. And then, by His Spirit, He comes to live it again through me: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).
- D. I close then with one final question: Is the Lord over history, the Lord in you?!